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ABSTRACT

The West Genesee/Syracuse University Teaching Center consists of a three-person staff coordinating supervision of students, organization of staff development programs, and instructional and leadership responsibilities. Financial support is divided between the University and the school district. Tuition credits are offered by the University to the district in exchange for aid in field-based programs; the financial liability incurred from these credit grants is offset by monies from out-of-center, tuition-paying registrants. In addition to a wide range of successfully completed and on-going projects, the Center has sparked a great deal of pride among participants, as well as improved teachers' knowledge of what they as individuals can do to improve their own, and the profession's, standing. Two major tasks facing the Center are: (1) the problem of the gap between theory and practice in preservice education and the narrowing of that gap; and (2) building the district's long-term staff development program. (MJB)

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UNSPECIAL STRENGTHS? UNSPECIAL PROBLEMS?

A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE WEST GENESEE/SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY TEACHING CENTER

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1. What is Special about our Center?

Perhaps most special about our Center is that we're not particularly special. We are a group of people from two previously discrete institutions who are helping each other with our overlapping jobs. We have no outstanding leader (if my colleagues will forgive me), no particular philosophy to unite and fire us, no outside mandate reinforcing our will to survive, no state or federal monies to display. So we might be a useful case study for other unspecial people hoping to establish a Center of some kind.

In 1973, the Division of Teacher Education of Syracuse University School of Education and the West Genesee School District decided to collaborate in the training of teachers. In the preservice range of the continuum, the goal was to establish a model competency-based training program.

For teachers already in service, the aim was the improvement of instruction in the schools. Theory and practice were to unite. Operationally, the school teachers work with university teachers to draw up the competencies a preservice student is to demonstrate before being recommended as a beginning teacher. The schools are thus involved from the outset in the goals, and the substance, of the training. So with some bringing up-to-date where necessary on contemporary research and methods, they are ably equipped to diagnose and evaluate student progress, especially during the extensive field practice. This is obviously, then, a learning experience not only for students but for inservice

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teachers also. Additionally, teachers become increasingly aware of their individual lacks or weaknesses, and also of their strengths to build on. At a wider level, schools where students are concentrated give thought to how, with a building effort, they might be more effective. And beyond that, the district begins to assess its growth and accomplishment as a concerted professional body. In return for their generous help with student training, the university helps the schools along these various paths to improvement; not just those directly tied to the student program, but also those growing from the needs of particular teachers, of particular schools, and of the district. Tuition vouchers traditionally awarded to individual cooperating teachers are pooled, and the schools may use them not just to attend university courses that already exist (for better for worse), but to pay for university credit in an infinitely flexible and varied staff development program of their own fashioning. Receiving the registration vouchers, the university returns to the Center a generous percentage of real money, with which the development program is financed. The symbiosis of the arrangement becomes apparent. The more the schools help with preservice training, the more they themselves learn; the more the university helps with staff development, the richer the environment for their students. All this activity - supervision of students, organization of staff development program, instruction and leadership of much of this program - is coordinated by a Center staff of one coordinator, an assistant coordinator, and a secretary. The salaries of these three people are paid half by the school district, half by the university. And that is the full extent of the financial commitment for either body. Granting a percentage of the tuition vouchers as real money for financing those staff development activities not taken care of with inhouse Center talent might have been reckoned an additional liability for the University; but in fact Center courses (which form part of the staff development program) are now attracting out-of-Center, money-paying registrants, and the extra real-money revenue thus generated for the university compensates for the real-money outlay. Thus for the equivalent cost of an assistant professor and a half-time secretary, the University enjoys the supervision of some 123 field experience

plus opportunities for many more students to observe and act as aides,
quarter-placements per year, in professionally lively, welcoming, schools; for the equivalent cost of a teacher and half-time secretary, the schools enjoy a wide-ranging, responsive, staff development program, and help and stimulus from involvement in preservice training.

One might concede that the person who had the vision of collaboration and then dreamed up this ingenious way of getting so much for so little money is indeed rather special. This is Jim Collins, until now head of teacher training at Syracuse. Beyond that, no concessions. We are school and university teachers, school and university administrators, such as you would find anywhere: overworked and underpaid (it goes without saying), each quite limited in expertise, none knowing too clearly what it is that we ~~don't~~ all of us more happy with what we know
don't know, than with what we don't, trying to find the golden mean between flexibility and maintenance of standards, between trust and laissez-faire, between doing what we want to do and what we perceive as our societal charge. In short, we typify institutional education, reportedly impervious to change. Are we really bringing about qualitative improvement? If so, how?

II. What Do We Do Best?

Each year, the Center reports a long list of accomplishments:

- developments in the preservice program jointly planned and effected;
- thus-and-such students satisfactorily completing the various sequences;
- a wide array of staff development activities for both teachers and administrators: courses and workshops (both led by schools people and university people and outside consultants), visits of provocative educational leaders, conference participation, preparation of materials, use of the resource room
- evidence of effect on children's activities and on instructional program
- research conducted by classroom teachers, university faculty and graduate students
- refinement of Center policy and operational procedures.

A lengthy opinionaire reveals participants widely satisfied with both content and form of Center operations.

Encouraged by what they see, two more school districts have formed centers with the University, thus expanding the resource pool.

So much for the facts and figures of apparent success. But our real step forward, without which the rest is busy-work, is harder to document. Nevertheless, even compensating for writer's bias, I have to state my belief that the Center has sparked among participants both pride in their profession and also, with quite personal force, a sense of how much each individual can contribute. Of course not every preservice student who passes through the Center, not every teacher and every administrator in the district and the university, is inspired! But copious unsolicited feedback tells us that it is a shared feeling of lively personal commitment that for example swells our courses and workshops while other extended campus enrollments are falling, has our university faculty tackling research in the untamed field, and in sum preserves and even increases our budget throughout the stringent institutional cuts. If the Center didn't respond to needs, and concretely deliver on its promises, doubtless the spirit would have died. ~~by now~~. But equally, if the Center did not recognize as its foundation a personal commitment to the profession and a sense of personal worth, it would total no more than the institutional hoop-jumping we have all despaired of before now.

As mandated Centers or inducements for their establishment become increasingly common, I think it is vital that along with the science of improved instruction and the mechanics of delivery we remember the spirit.

The growth of the commitment in our Center seems intimately bound to the collaboration, with its resultant diversity. After all, it was when the organisms of the earth progressed to partnering that they began to produce not carbon copies of themselves but infinite variations. Among the widely varied aspects of centering,

any number of individuals will find something that fits their particular wish to know, or be, at least a little more of this of that. The Center doesn't get people from X to Y, with Y where they ought to be. With its array of models and choices and capacity for generating more, it helps people find out where they are, and where they want to go, and helps them help themselves get there.

III. Major Problems?

Two of our biggest tasks we have only begun to tackle.

First, the integration of theory and practice in preservice training. Students perceive much of their campus work as irrelevant. They want to learn above all how to survive. University faculty, on the other hand, are disturbed at the prospect of sending out beginning teachers lacking in the theoretical foundations that will set them learning and growing throughout their professional lives. This is particularly true in the "basics," where math (for example) means to the student helping children through textbooks and standardized tests, while the campus math specialist wants to help children to a numeracy in which they understand the underlying processes, delighting in the rhythms and designs, or at the least can cope with the measuring and accounts of everyday life. To make headway here we shall need not committees, but working parties of students, university faculty, and teachers, who will act on what they think and discover and recommend. We shall need professors who are anxious to tackle the problem; who will teach on campus, try out their ideas in the classroom, and produce materials, all in accordance with their growing thinking. Their publishing will follow right along with their new work, including the various kinds of research that go with it. We shall need teachers who are already doing what they can to meet demands on more than one level; who will find time in the classroom for trying out new ideas, both trying themselves and helping students try them; teachers who will join the action research. Load time will be needed. Resources will also be needed for packaging the materials for both university students and school youngsters, with as much packaged as feasible in order to make more time for comparing experiences. We needn't start on a grandiose scale. One

professor, a small group of teachers, a handful of students could make a difference. A team of two faculty, and a critical mass in a building, would be ideal. So bringing together the initial nuclear group may not be too difficult. Keeping them together through the many other demands on their energies may be harder. Then spreading not just the word but the deed may well be tough.

The second major task is building the district's long-term staff development plans, starting from thorough-going self-assessment and wideranging discussion of goals. No less! Well, there's growing realization these days that we need them, (which is a great advance in which the Center has undoubtedly played its part); so maybe we shall eventually get there.

Again, we need working together the people whose immediate responsibility this is, and who are anxious that their efforts add up to well-sequenced steps forward. It seems entirely likely that the preservice working group and the staff development working group would overlap, even coincide; or it may be that a preservice group could get going immediately in some area that people are ready to explore while the staff development group examined the overall picture before jumping in.

We might call these "tasks", rather than problems; but they are of course replete with problems of many kinds. Much the problems with which preservice training and staff development are traditionally replete. It remains to be seen whether unspecial people will be able to lick them if they work together.